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16. History, prophecy, revolution: Italian politics in Byron and Foscolo*

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One of most pervasive and durable effects of the revolutionary decades on European culture was the notion that the future would be nothing like the past. For Tocqueville, the course of history revealed a continuing movement toward a greater ‘equality of conditions’.¹ In the introduction to *Democracy in America*, he described what he saw as the unstoppable march of liberty from the destruction of feudalism to the conquests of the Enlightenment in science and the arts. What was to happen from that point on, however, was less clear: ‘Where are we headed, then? No one can say’. Tocqueville was not alone among contemporary observers to present revolution, or at least the transformation of European societies in a democratic sense, as inevitable. Of course, opinions differed on whether this transformation was desirable or fraught with danger (Tocqueville thought the latter). But from both sides of the political divide, many looked at recent events in America and across Europe with feelings similar to the ‘religious terror’ evoked by Tocqueville. Uncertainty about the future became more acute, as traditional historical knowledge appeared to offer no useful tools to predict the direction of things to come.

Here I follow German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who argues that in the final decades of the eighteenth century a new open-ended temporal structure emerged, which made it impossible to treat forthcoming events as if they were the projections of past occurrences, on the basis of lessons learned from history. What then became necessary, Koselleck observes, was a kind of historical prognostication that went ‘beyond the rational prognoses of the politicians’. In search of an interpretive model

¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy* 6.

capable of peering beyond the limits of calculable experience, European culture had recourse to ‘an audacious combination of politics and prophecy’ that united rational prediction with the older, visionary mode referring back to expectations of salvation.² This, I suggest, opened a space for poetry to present itself as an alternative methodology not only for narrating the past but also, having donned its ancient prophetic garb, for prefiguring the future.

Although he does not talk of prophecy, Paul Hamilton recently argued a related point about the role of poetry in post-Revolutionary politics. In *Realpoetik*, he charts the process by which the aesthetic field became the privileged locus for imagining Europe’s political future after Waterloo. He sees the application of poetic methods to practical political discourse as an attempt to reformulate liberal ideas of citizenship and equality after the failure of the French Revolution. Revisionism, according to Hamilton, should be understood not merely as regression but as the continuation of revolution by other means, a pragmatic compromise that allowed the pursuit of the desired polity to continue. ‘The battle for what is to be political reality’, he argues, ‘is fought on a rhetorical field whose free speech is exemplary of what politics should be like’.³ The ‘generic generosity’ of the aesthetic discourse enabled writers not only to respond to the actual state of affairs created by the Congress of Vienna, but also actively to propose alternative possible futures. Hamilton is most helpful to me when he observes how the prevalent approach to the ‘Romantic ideology’ has been to demystify ideas about the political role of art rather than analyse their significance in the particular historical context in which they emerged.⁴

² Koselleck, *Futures* 19.

³ Hamilton, *Realpoetik* 35.

⁴ See McGann, *Romantic Ideology*; and Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignities*, Redfield, *Politics* and Wolfson, *Borderlines* on the political impact of Romantic aesthetics.

In this chapter I compare two poetic interventions in the political discourse of post-1815 Europe: Ugo Foscolo's *Dei sepolcri* (written in 1806 and published the following year) and Lord Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante* (LBCPW 4.213-39, composed in 1819 and published in 1821). The poems, as I will show, present interconnected views of Italy's political situation as a divided country under despotic and foreign rule, whose resurgence they portray as imminent and, at the same time, profoundly doubtful. Both Foscolo and Byron chose to articulate their vision of Italy's uncertain yet fast-approaching future in the form of ancient prophecies pronounced by visionary figures of the classical and Western traditions (Cassandra and Dante). It is my contention that their use of the prophetic voice responds to the conceptual shift from foreclosed to unpredictable future described by Koselleck. This should not be seen, however, [as](#) an attempt to read the future in terms of the past. In their own different ways, *Dei sepolcri* and *The Prophecy* both strive to come to terms with and [even](#) directly influence the experience of a new time moving fast into an uncharted future.

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Byron's famous phrase 'the poetry of politics', (*BLJ* 8.47: 16 February 1821) refers to the liberation of Italy, but its exact meaning is debated. According to Kurt Heinzelman, by 'poetry' Byron means the ideal of national self-determination, since poetry for him is always connected to the question of self-identification and freedom.⁵ But the most widespread interpretation is that 'poetry' here signifies the ideal in a negative sense, as something unlikely to materialize and essentially unworkable in practice. For Roderick Beaton, the phrase gives away Byron's scepticism about the ability of the Carbonari actually to further the Italian cause, which he continued to

⁵ Heinzelman, 'Byron's poetry' 373.

regard as ‘not real politics, but only the “poetry of politics”’.⁶ Maria Schoina goes further in arguing that it is precisely Byron’s willingness to believe in the improbable, ‘to hope even of the hopeless’ as he puts it, that constitutes the poeticization of politics.⁷ My own perspective is that, in his relations with the Italian patriots, Byron is steering between the Scylla of unattainable, perfectionist ideals of autonomy and the Charybdis of factional struggles and power politics. The difficulty derives not only from the intricate political situation of the peninsula, but also from a fundamental ambivalence of Romantic culture *vis-à-vis* Italian history, which could be taken as evidence of both the highest values of civic humanism and the internal weaknesses that put republics at risk.⁸

Thus, the prospect of Italian freedom is attractive to Byron because it provides the hypothetical plan where this contradiction can be solved for all humanity. In a journal entry that precedes the note on ‘the poetry of politics’ by a few days, he writes: ‘What is Poetry? The feeling of a Former World and Future’ (*BLJ* 8.37: 28 January 1821). This helps to clarify how the emancipation of Italy appears to Byron as the working through of the historical trauma that is Italy’s decline. What is at stake here is not only the return to a better past (the ‘days of August’), but a more global reconfiguration of the narrative of revolutionary failure and decline that ‘a free Italy’ would provoke. ‘The poetry of politics’, therefore, lies in a reorientation of history with liberty as its object, and away from the trap of cyclical time. A similar set of far-reaching preoccupations with the role of Italy in the shape of world history is shared

⁶ Beaton, *Byron’s War* 64. Peter Cochran (*Byron’s Romantic Politics* 181) suspects that B is being ‘sarcastic’. For Susan Wolfson (*Borderlines* 143) he is sincere but soon his enthusiasm gives way to ‘ironic embarrassment’.

⁷ Schoina, ‘The “poetry of politics”’.

⁸ Kelsall has shown that this ambivalence has its roots in the ‘poetic moralisation’ of Italian history by Whig intellectuals (*Byron’s Politics* 60).

by Foscolo and the discourse of Italian nationalism emerging from Foscolo's original synthesis of historical philosophy and patriotism.

Maura O'Connor claims that 'we need to see the transformation of Italy from mere geographical expression to nation not as the forward march of some inevitable process of nation building' but as the 'imagined dream of many English' and, we should add, Italian 'men and women'.⁹ In the landscape of post-Napoleonic Europe, the political and cultural space of Italy appeared unstable and hardly decipherable, and one which would profit from an application of 'Realpoetik'. The idea that the Risorgimento succeeded unexpectedly and against all odds, thanks in part to the cheerleading of the English, persists in much Anglophone historiography. Stuart Woolf calls the unification the 'unexpected outcome' of 'a fortuitous coincidence between international and local developments'.¹⁰ And Christopher Duggan expresses surprise at how the country was unified 'in the teeth of so many seemingly insurmountable obstacles'.¹¹ This approach has been questioned by influential cultural historians such as Franco Venturi and Alberto Banti, who instead place emphasis on the dense intellectual and political context and the role of historical actors that helped produce unification. Still, the rhetoric of chance can help recover something of the experience of the revolutionary moment in its own time, not as an inevitable process but as an opening toward many possible futures, or what Koselleck calls 'futures past'.¹² I argue that it is from this particular position that both Foscolo and Byron utter their retrospective prophecies about Italy's future.

Foscolo and Byron knew and respected each other's work, and they corresponded in 1818 through Hobhouse, when Foscolo was already an exile in

⁹ O'Connor, *Romance* 9.

¹⁰ Woolf, 'La storia politica' 381. All translations from Italian are mine.

¹¹ Duggan, *The Force of Destiny* xvi.

¹² Koselleck, *Futures Past* 259.

London.¹³ Comparisons between Foscolo and Byron have traditionally hinged around their shared experience of exile and peregrinations across England, Italy and Greece, and their passionate temperament.¹⁴ My own analysis focuses on the way Foscolo and Byron conceptualize historical time in relation to the issue of Italian independence in *Dei sepolcri* and *The Prophecy of Dante*.

Stylistically the two poems have little in common: the metrical form, imagery and language of *Dei sepolcri* draw heavily on classical sources, especially Lucretius.¹⁵ Byron composed the *Prophecy* using *terza rima*, partly as a metrical experiment, and partly in a quasi-philological attempt to reconstruct Dante's late style (an ambitious task for which he pre-emptively apologizes to his Italian readers in the Preface).¹⁶ The Italians, Byron observes, 'are particularly jealous of all that is left them as a nation – their literature' (*LBCPW* 4.234).¹⁷ His remark echoes a famous section of *Dei sepolcri* where Foscolo establishes Florence's place as the ideal centre of the nation not on geopolitical or economic grounds, but because of its cultural resonance. The genius of Italy's philosophers and poets are

[...] l'Itale glorie, uniche forse
 Da che le mal vietate Alpi e l'alterna
 Onnipotenza delle umane sorti,
 Armi e sostanze t'invadeano, ed are
 E patria, e, tranne la memoria, tutto (181-5).

¹³ See Vincent, *Byron, Hobhouse and Foscolo*.

¹⁴ See Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo*; Domenichelli, 'Byron and Foscolo'.

¹⁵ See Di Benedetto, *Scrittoio del Foscolo*.

¹⁶ See Taylor, 'Byron's use'.

¹⁷ Two early translations of *The Prophecy* were published, see Bruni and Innocenti, *La profezia* 34-6.

(‘Italy’s glories, the only ones perhaps since the unguarded Alps and the inconstant sway of human destinies, seized arms and wealth, shrines and homeland, and everything else, except memory’).¹⁸

It seems very likely that Byron knew Foscolo’s poem and it is almost certain that he had access to the essays on Dante that Foscolo published on the *Edinburgh Review* between 1818 and 1819.¹⁹ There, Foscolo offered an image of Dante as an epic bard in the mould of Homer, a political exile, and a prophet of Italian independence who

conceived and executed the project of creating the Language and the Poetry of a nation – exposing all the political wounds of this country – teaching the Church and the States of Italy, that the imprudence of the Popes, the civil wars within cities, and the consequent introduction of foreign arms, would necessarily lead to the eternal slavery and disgrace of the Italians.²⁰

The similarities between this and Byron’s own portrayal are evident. Yet, it would be wrong to conflate these later writings with *Dei sepolcri*, where the presiding spirit is not yet that of Dante but of Homer and the classical tradition. It is only in England that Foscolo began to engage systematically with the *Commedia* and to identify with Dante’s stance as a poet, tapping into growing English interest in Dante as a way to carve out a readership for himself.²¹ The connecting link between *Dei sepolcri* and *The Prophecy* is, rather, the prophetic mode itself and the temporal configuration it produces, beyond the specific figures to whom prophesying is entrusted.

¹⁸ See also Staël: ‘In their present state, the only glory permitted to the Italians is that of the arts’ (*Corinne* 21).

¹⁹ See Havely, *Dante’s British Public* 150.

²⁰ Foscolo, *Studi* 68. See Oliver, ‘Romantic “Dantism”’; Luzzi, ‘Founders’; and Havely, *Dante’s British Public* 128-53.

²¹ See Da Pozzo, ‘Introduzione’, in *Studi su Dante* xxix; Dionisotti, *Geografia* 270; Braidà, *Dante* 68.

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Both Foscolo and Byron stressed the topicality and the political import of their compositions. Foscolo explained that the purpose of *Dei sepolcri* is ‘to inspire the political emulation of Italians through examples of nations that honour the memory and the sepulchres of great men’.²² Byron repeatedly urged his friends in London to hasten the publication of *The Prophecy*, fearing that it would be made obsolete by the outbreak of the insurrection that it foreshadowed.²³ However, neither text focuses specifically on the present. Both reverse the perspective and visualize the present as the past’s former future through intensely proleptic narrations and the use of retrospective prophecy. The poet’s voice plays a pivotal role in this interplay of temporal displacements. The two texts discuss the failed recognition of poetic genius and the complex relationship of art to political power, analyzing the implications for Italy’s long decline. Both poets read themselves into the vicissitudes of unheeded prophets of the past: Dante, ‘il Ghibellin fuggiasco’ (174) or ‘the banished Ghibelline’ (2.34), who is joined in Foscolo’s poem by Homer and eighteenth-century Italian writers Giuseppe Parini and Vittorio Alfieri. The posthumous fame these earlier poets and, by analogy, the authors themselves will enjoy is made to coincide with the awakening of Italians and the resurgence of Italy to freedom and justice. Paradoxically, both Foscolo and Byron present tombs as catalysts for the process of regeneration, with Foscolo believing that a visit to Santa Croce in Florence, where Machiavelli and Galileo are buried, can strengthen one’s commitment to the national cause.

These monuments represent the ‘gods of the fatherland’ (190), in a revival of the civic rituals of republican Rome that owes much to the Jacobin idea of civil

²² Ugo Foscolo, ‘Lettera’ 518.

²³ ‘Now is a good time for the Prophecy of Dante; events have acted as an advertisement thereto’ (*BLJ* 7.205: B to Hobhouse, 17 October 1820).

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religion.²⁴ The tombs of national heroes will lend protection and impetus to future revolutions:

Ché ove speme di gloria agli animosi
intelletti rifulga ed all'Italia,
quindi trarrem gli auspici

(‘Wherever shines the hope of glory on spirited minds and on Italy from there we shall take the auspices’, 186-8). In a more pessimistic vein, Byron’s Dante declares that his premonitions will remain unheeded

[...] till the hour be come

When Truth shall strike their eyes though many a tear,
And make them own the Prophet in his tomb (4.152-4).

These are the only moments when the poems’ speakers contemplate what is yet to come at the moment of writing. Everything else in *The Prophecy* is history, and precise intimations of events go only as far as the sixteenth century.

In *Dei sepolcri* the poetic utterance is situated in the present and moves from prehistory to classical antiquity and modern Europe in a survey of different burial customs, which Foscolo uses as the measure of a society’s collective ethos. The poem does end with a prophecy, but in this case too the events foretold have already come to pass: on the eve of Troy’s destruction, Cassandra predicts its poetic rebirth in Homer’s *Iliad* – hardly news. Literature and the Scriptures are full of prophecies *ex eventu*: the rhetorical gesture of predicting events which have already taken place is traditionally intended to provide a form of validation for poetry’s insight. This, however, is not how Foscolo and Byron use the device: both poems claim to express a

²⁴ See Ozouf, *Festivals*.

prophetic vision relevant to the evolving process of the Italian national struggle. In Byron's poem, Dante claims to speak like the Biblical prophets, empowered by

[...] the spirit of the fervent days of Old,

When words were things that came to pass, and thought

Flashed o'er the future (2.1-3).

As L.E. Marshall has observed, here Byron is concerned with the performative power of poetry: 'if words are things, and if these words can make millions feel and think, then the poet *can* do something. He can use language as a weapon for freeing thought through true nomination'.²⁵ And this can only happen within a temporal framework in which rational calculations of probability are not applicable, and the future can only be known through poetic intuition and imagination – that is, if time is an open-ended, linear progression and not the predictable return of the same.

Thomas Huxley, in a lecture of 1880 on the evidential paradigm in the sciences, used the phrase 'retrospective prophecy',²⁶ and Huxley's observations hold true also with regard to the divinatory mode of Byron's and Foscolo's texts: even if the content of their prophecies is already known, their visionary perspective is an attempt to decipher what cannot be apprehended fully in the present. Ian Balfour has explained that the generic standards of ancient prophecy do not apply to secular, Romantic versions. A text does not need actually to foretell the future in order to attain a prophetic aura. In a way, all thoughtful writing that expresses deep insights into the past ('the feeling of a Former World and Future') is prophetic: 'prophecy is a

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²⁵ Marshall, "Words Are Things" 819.

²⁶ Thomas H. Huxley, 'On the method of Zadig: Retrospective prophecy as a function of science', quoted in Ginzburg, *Clues* 211 n. 95.

call and a claim much more than it is a prediction, a call oriented toward a present that is not present'.²⁷

Foscolo too treats the present as the past's former future. He illustrates a theory of history that distinguishes between natural and human time. Natural time is real, homogeneous and infinite, and, in accordance to materialistic principles, forever wears down matter and recombines it into new shapes and forms of life:

[...] e involve

Tutte cose l'oblio nella sua notte;

E una forza operosa le affatica

Di moto in moto (17-20).

('[...] oblivion enfolds everything in its night; and a tireless force wears them out from change to change'). By contrast, human time is an artificial creation that brings meaning and motivation into a universe that has none. This 'illusion' provides a structure to human experiences of time and supports the organization of social life, leading to the institution of sepulchres. With an anthropologist's eye for customs and rituals, Foscolo traces this practice back to the origins of human societies (91-6).

The desire to preserve the memory of the dead implies the idea that time is not homogeneous but has peaks (notable events, special people); and that it is irreversible and advances towards a future that will be different from what we have known (which is why it makes sense to remember). Memory and the capacity to empathize with the past lift humans out of the meaningless, indifferent time of nature, and the 'correspondence of loving feelings' (30) across time gives time a new shape, moulded by the consciousness of loss and separation from the past as well as the illusion that the gap can be bridged. This is the core belief from which religion first develops and,

²⁷ Balfour, *Rhetoric* 18.

along with it, the ‘national virtues’ (102) on which communities are founded, which are cemented and revived by the cult of an imagined common past.

Here, at last, is the link to Italian politics. Foscolo lashes out at the Italian, and specifically at the Lombard, elites, too absorbed in their own interests to care about national ideals and incapable even of defending their country from foreign invasion. Echoing the typical anti-Italian accusation of unmanliness, Foscolo conjures up the bizarre image of ‘il lombardo Sardanapalo’, a mixture of Oriental debauchery and sensible husbandry, who only has ears for

[...] il muggito de buoi

Che dagli antri abduani e dal Ticino,

Lo fan d’ozi beato e di vivande (59-61).

(‘the mooing of oxen which from the caves of the Adda and the Ticino give him a life of leisure and feasting’).²⁸ Foscolo sees indolence and indifference to the national cause as consequences of the Italians’ long disconnection from their common past which began with the advent of Christianity. With its emphasis on the ‘city of God’, the new religion spread eschatological beliefs that devalued civic life and engagement in the politics of the early republic. Moreover, the macabre imagery that came with Christianity made death into something repulsive and terrifying: the custom of burying the dead inside churches meant that those who came to pray were contaminated by ‘the stench of corpses’ and cities became filled with ‘images of skeletons’ (108-9).

Somewhat inconsistently, Foscolo then denounces Napoleon’s edict of 1806, which forbade burial inside the city on health grounds, as a further attempt to disempower Italians by distancing them from the symbols of their past. We need the

²⁸ On effeminacy as an ‘Italian vice’ see Patriarca, *Italian Vices* 20-50.

inspiring presence of monuments, says Foscolo, because it is from the sepulchres of eminent Italians that 'we will take the auspices' (188), as in ancient times, before the battle for national liberation. Christianity and tyrannical rulers conspire to keep Italians outside human time, immersed in the unvarying flow of mechanistic nature, oblivious of the past and incapable of imagining a different future. For Foscolo the time of history, human time, is illusory but is the only one worth living. Therefore, Italy must strive to re-enter it and join modern European nations such as England, where ancient *pietas* and the sense of civic duty are still alive. Foscolo thus believes in a set of universal values that characterize humanity at its best, and depend on the belief in the power of human beings to make their own history. Italy has forgotten these values, and they have to be revived. But before we see how that is to be done, let us return to Byron.

In *The Prophecy*, Byron tackles the problem of Italian politics with what might at first seem a more pragmatic attitude: the cause of Italy's decline is not a matter of transcendental philosophy but a political problem to be solved with the tools of political analysis and planning. Unlike Foscolo, Byron does not resort here to the old argument of Italian degeneracy, and instead has Dante pronounce a passionate appeal to 'brave' Italians to overcome factionalism:

Are ye not brave? Yes, yet the Ausonian soil
Hath hearts, and hands, and arms, and hosts to bring
Against Oppression; but how vain the toil,
While still Division sows the seeds of woe,
And weakness, till the Stranger reaps the spoil (2.131-5).

Yet in other areas of the poem the programmatic clarity of this statement is displaced by a more obscure vision of the Italian situation, tinged with fatalism and historical

pessimism. In the first canto, Dante contemplates taking his revenge on the Florentine Guelphs who have banished him:

Revenge,
 Who sleeps to dream of blood, and waking glows
 With the oft-baffled, slakeless thirst of change,
 When we shall mount again, and they that trod
 Be trampled on, while Death and Ate range
 O'er humbled heads and sever'd necks – Great God!
 Take these thoughts from me – to thy hands I yield
 My many wrongs, and thine almighty rod
 Will fall on those who smote me, – be my shield! (1.113-21)

Following an ancient topos, revenge is led by Death and Ate, the Greek personification of blind folly and delusion. But Dante's vision here extends well beyond his own personal vicissitudes. The whole realm of political action is governed by a violent, obsessive desire of revenge, 'The oft-baffled, slakeless thirst of change' cannot in fact produce real transformations, as its only object is the annihilation of political rivals. Dante races forward towards future consequences of his action, were he to take revenge against the enemy side. Even more than the 'sever'd necks' and the death toll itself, it is the compulsive pattern of retaliation that horrifies him.

Revolution here has returned to the original sense of circular, gyratory movement, and the violent overthrow of the enemy faction does not modify the structure of power, but simply replaces one despotism with another. The party man is consumed by one desire: 'When we shall mount again, and they that trod / Be trampled on'. In two compact lines, Byron represents the brutality of the political struggle with animalistic violence reminiscent of the *Inferno*, while at the same time exposing the hollowness

of factional divisions: ‘we’ and ‘they’ are interchangeable here, and Dante’s phrase could be at another time his enemy’s.²⁹

The alternation in power of Guelphs and Ghibellines follows a fixed path that corresponds to pre-modern notions of human affairs unfolding in cyclical time. Dante calls for divine intervention to release Florence and the world from this vicious circle and establish justice and freedom. In a sense, his self-reflective and self-critical analysis here represents what Dominick LaCapra has called the ‘working-through’ of historical trauma, that is ‘an articulatory process that generates countervailing forces to acting-out and the repetition compulsion’.³⁰ Byron contrasts two visions of historical time as either cyclical or linear. Critics have laboured over Byron’s oscillation, especially in his ‘Italian’ works, between a theory of history as senseless repetition and one that valorizes human action and the contribution of exceptional individualities.³¹ *The Prophecy* addresses this issue head-on, dramatizing the question of whether Italy’s future is determined by the cycle of rise and fall to which all civilizations are subjected, or whether a deliberate political plan can steer the country toward social harmony and liberty.

Byron’s concurrent visions of history can be compared to the dualism Foscolo sees between natural and human time: the ever-repeating cycle of rise and fall in Dante’s feuding city-state resembles the natural cycle of life and death evoked with dismay in *Dei sepolcri*; and the rallying of Italians at the end of canto 2 of *The Prophecy* echoes Foscolo’s exhortation to Italians to re-enter historical time and take meaningful political action. Underneath the loose structure of *Dei sepolcri* lies a solid

²⁹ Among many possible references see *Inferno* canto 7, where the avaricious clash against the prodigals (22-35) and the wrathful viciously attack one another (109-14).

³⁰ LaCapra, *History* 103.

³¹ See Cheeke, *Byron* 10-14; Pomarè, *Byron* 135-68; and O’Neill, ‘The same rehearsal’.

philosophical core that allows Foscolo to manage the double time-frame in a more systematic way, positing one as the natural given and the other as the product of civilization. Byron is less concerned than Foscolo with making a consistent philosophical argument, but he too interrogates history to find an answer to the question of whether Revolution can take place in Italy, and to what extent its outcome is predicated on past events. Put simply, both poets use history to prophesy the future, and do so with a specific political aim. As we have seen, Foscolo believes that Italy's future depends on the revival of ancient civic virtues. For Byron, civil strife in medieval Italy prefigures the current disunity in the nationalist front. However, both Byron's and Foscolo's prophecies are tinged with doubt, as the once stable relationship linking past, present and future comes under pressure from revolutionary events and concurrent developments in the philosophy of history.

Foscolo's ideas on the separation of natural and human time resonate with what Koselleck has called 'the temporalization of history', anticipated by Vico and developed by the radical wing of the Enlightenment.³² Byron's model of history, especially with regard to the Italian context, is influenced by contemporary historiographers such as Gibbon and Sismondi, who discarded the notion of historical cycles (as well as fate and divine Providence), liberating human energy for change, but in so doing also undermined the direct applicability of past examples to the present and the possibility of learning from history: 'Since the future of modern history opens itself as the unknown, it becomes plannable – indeed it must be planned. And with each new plan a fresh degree of uncertainty is introduced, since it

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³² Foscolo's knowledge of Vico was mediated by versions of English empiricism and neo-Jacobin thought circulating in Padua and Venice in the 1790s, as Del Vento has shown in *Un'allievo*.

presupposes a lack of experience', Koselleck says.³³ For me, the combination of uncertainty and purposefulness expressed by both Foscolo and Byron in relation to Italian politics corresponds to the conceptual shift from a future where nothing fundamentally new could arise, to a future constantly in the making, open to infinite new possibilities.

Balfour notes that 'in post-Biblical and postclassical life, the prophetic tends to emerge, as does the apocalyptic, at times of great social and political turbulence'.³⁴ Italy in the first decades of the nineteenth century surely fits this description. Revolutionary discourse is apocalyptic, in the sense that it announces the end of the world as we know it; but in contrast to the Apocalypse of the Scriptures, it requires the action of men, who need to be mobilized and organized. This is precisely what Foscolo and Byron are aiming to do. Their poems hold up the past as a mirror to the future, not to signify the inevitable return of the same but to indicate a way out from the cycles of old history. When Byron draws a parallel between Dante's Italy and the Italy of his day, he is not saying that history repeats itself. He is describing a bad continuity that has to be broken: Italy is stuck in a worsening loop of internecine strife and foreign occupation because of its incapacity to solve problems that, in Byron's fiction, had already been exposed by Dante back in the fourteenth century (3.117-8). Dante's prophecy will hold true until Italians recognize the accuracy of his political diagnosis and act accordingly – which means, until they cast off their vicious habits and unite to make the revolution.

Similarly, Foscolo emphasizes how the passage into human time – that is, history in the sense of a linear development – will not happen by itself. The 'spirited minds' of Italy must awake and put an end to the centuries-old state 'where the ardour

³³ Koselleck, *Futures Past* 2.

³⁴ Balfour, *Rhetoric* 21.

for great deeds lies asleep', (137-9). There is no assurance that this will happen: these are no longer 'the days of Old, / When words were things that came to pass' (2.1-2); the prophecies uttered in Byron's and Foscolo's poems do not announce a fate that will overtake humanity but open up a space for political planning and action, which is up to people, in this case Italians, to take up.

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